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AUTHOR Counelis, James Steve
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ABSTRACT

Current policy on the distribution of incomplete grades designates such grades as indicating postponement of an examination and/or other assignment for some serious reason. The current policy of converting a grade of incomplete to F after some stated time interval is open to question. Current university policy on the automatic conversion of incomplete grades to F should be reviewed. This document attempts to bring qualitative thought to bear upon the use of incomplete as a grade. Only when it is in the serious pedagogical and curricular interest of our student client should the grade of incomplete be issued. The student more often than the professor is the better judge of that interest. Chart 1 shows the proportion of incomplete grades issued per disciplines, their distribution being by percentage of incomplete grades awarded. (Author/KE)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO
Office of Institutional Studies

THE GRADE OF INCOMPLETE: A BRIEF REVIEW AND COMMENT

by
James Steve Counelis

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--JSC

October 12, 1972

THE GRADE OF INCOMPLETE: A BRIEF REVIEW AND COMMENT

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James Steve Counelis[+]

Incomplete Grades:

In the greening movement of American higher education, there is much rhetoric and literature on grading systems. There are critics and detractors as well as proponents and evaluators who have studied this question. On this campus, grading was discussed in The San Francisco Foghorn (Vol. LXVI, No. 6, pp. 4-5) of October 1, 1971; and a committee under the Registrar, Mr. C. Jankowske, has been studying it.

More recently, the University Registrar provided the Reverend Edmond J. Smyth, S.J., Vice President for Academic Affairs, a frequency distribution of Inc. grades awarded in the several disciplines taught during 1972. This frequency

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[+]Dr. James Steve Counelis is Director of the Office of Institutional Studies and Associate Professor of Education in the School of Education in the University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California 94117.

distribution of Inc. grades was prepared at the request of Fr. Smyth. The informational memorandum, dated August 4, 1972, was presented by Fr. Smyth to a recent meeting of the Deans of the several schools and colleges for their information.

Regardless of datal area, frequency distributions are not interpretable without a reference line, such as the original question which prompted the collection of data, or some specific notion of "ought," or some usual empirical criterion. In the present case, the gross total of 1842 Inc. grades given for this period time is not a meaningful fact in itself. However, when it is known that 1842 Inc. grades constituted 4.69% of total students in those classes, the relative proportion provides a more meaningful assertion about the gross fact of 1842 Inc. grades. See Chart No. 1 for the proportion of Inc. grades issued per discipline for the stated academic terms.

But even with 4.69% as a statistic, it is not possible to make a reasonable quantitative assertion as to whether any of these disciplines are issuing "too many" or "too few" Inc. grades, if the latter be possible.

Chart No. 2 provides a histogram of the 41 disciplines, their distribution being by percentage of Inc. grades awarded. This distribution is approximately normal; the test being that the ideal normal curve has a mean deviation (MD) = .7979σ. In this case the ideal normal curve with the standard

deviation of 2.85 would have a MD = 2.27. The calculated MD from the data is 2.22, which indicates approximate normality, a curve slightly skewed to the right.

Accepting the premise that those disciplines that are found to be two or more standard deviations from the mean as being "exceptional" in distributing Inc. grades, than this objective measure provides the departments within which these disciplines are taught an opportunity to reflect upon their cause. Some reasons might rest in the artifact of the program and its calendar. Others might rest upon philosophical predispositions of departments and faculty members. And others might reside in the nature of the learners and their curricular needs. Whatever the complex of reasons and causes, sober reflection on the nature of the Inc. grades is occasioned by Fr. Smyth's original concern.

Current Incomplete Grade Policy:

Current policy on the distribution of Inc. grades designates such grades as indicating postponement of an examination and/or other assignment for some serious reason. Such a policy is common in all institutions of higher learning with which I am acquainted. However, the current policy of converting Inc. grades to F's after some stated time interval is open to some question. Empirically, there is no warrant

for such a policy inasmuch as it reflects an argument from silence. The objective fact is that an Inc. grade represents nothing more or less than incomplete work. No qualitative grades, viz., A, B, C, D, F, P, and S, can be awarded by a professional staff member to the work of a student that is not available for such qualitative judgment. My belief is that current university policy on the automatic conversion of Inc. grades to F should be reviewed, thoroughly. Such a review is required because there does not appear to be any reasonable curricular or pedagogical reason for such a policy to be continued for long.

My hope for this report is that qualitative thought be brought to bear upon our use of the Inc. grade. Only when it is in the serious pedagogical and curricular interest of our student client should the Inc. grade be issued. And as for my view, the student more often than the professor is the better judge of that interest. As adults, our student clients are perfectly able to make their own decisions in this area. And I anticipate that our students are wise enough to consult with the faculty and the counseling staff about the merits of their decisions in the presence of other possible alternatives.

CHART NO. 1: INCOMPLETE GRADES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO,
FREQUENCY AND PROPORTIONAL DISTRIBUTION, 1971 - 1972

DISCIPLINES	FALL 1971			INTERSESSION 1972			SPRING 1972			TOTAL		
	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%
Anthropology	31	448	6.9	1	31	3.2	10	522	1.9	42	1,001	4.20
Astronomy	0	12	---	---	---	---	0	55	---	0	67	---
Business Graduate	45	357	12.6	---	---	---	42	391	10.7	87	748	11.63
Business Under-graduate	38	1,323	2.9	1	42	2.4	40	1,729	2.3	79	3,094	2.55
Biology	23	675	3.4	3	112	2.7	8	783	1.0	34	4,664	0.73
Computer Science	25	376	6.6	1	36	2.8	14	577	2.4	40	989	4.04
Chemistry	5	533	0.9	0	1	---	3	387	0.8	8	921	0.86
Economics	16	648	2.4	1	6	16.7	15	546	2.7	32	1,200	2.67
Education	90	1,467	6.1	3	104	2.9	37	1,228	3.0	130	2,799	4.64
Engineering	0	21	---	---	---	---	1	33	3.0	1	54	1.85
English	111	1,757	6.3	5	98	5.1	107	1,416	7.6	223	3,271	6.82
Ethnic Studies	17	287	5.9	4	29	13.8	23	216	10.6	44	532	8.27
Fine Arts	5	192	2.6	---	---	---	5	284	1.8	10	476	2.10

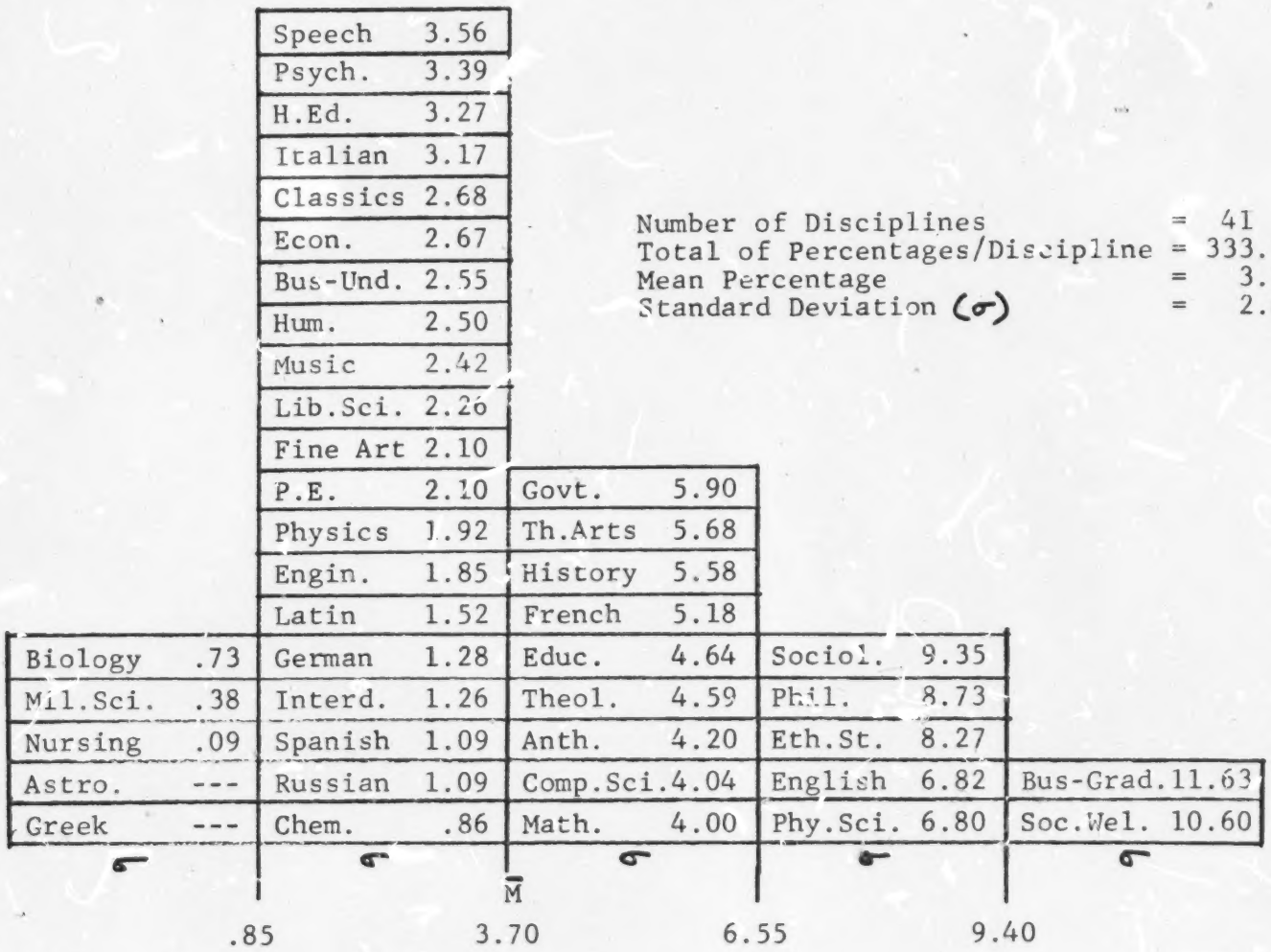
CHART NO. 1: CONTINUED

DISCIPLINES	FALL 1971			INTERSESSION 197			SPRING 1972			TOTAL		
	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%
Government	57	905	6.3	2	9	22.2	48	899	5.3	107	1,813	5.90
Health Education	3	67	4.5	1	8	12.5	4	170	2.4	8	245	3.27
History	71	1,088	6.5	9	38	23.7	32	880	3.6	112	2,006	5.58
Humanities	1	31	3.2	---	---	---	1	49	2.0	2	80	2.50
Interdisciplinary	3	257	1.2	0	1	---	2	138	1.4	5	396	1.26
Language-Classics	30	702	4.2	1	38	2.6	11	585	1.9	42	1,324	3.17
(Classics	2	46	4.3	1	31	3.2	1	72	1.4	4	149	2.68
(French	15	228	6.6	0	6	---	7	191	3.7	22	425	5.18
(German	1	51	2.0	---	---	---	0	27	---	1	78	1.28
(Greek	0	5	---	---	---	---	0	3	---	0	8	---
(Italian	4	76	5.3	---	---	---	0	51	---	4	126	3.17
(Latin	4	23	17.4	---	---	---	1	10	10.0	5	33	1.52
(Russian	1	22	4.5	---	---	---	0	26	---	1	48	2.08
(Spanish	3	251	1.2	0	1	---	2	205	1.0	5	457	1.09
Library Science	3	131	2.3	---	---	---	3	135	2.2	6	266	2.26
Mathematics	38	833	4.6	0	2	---	25	744	3.4	63	1,579	4.00
Military Science	0	95	---	---	---	---	1	167	0.6	1	262	0.38

CHART NO. 1: CONTINUED

DISCIPLINES	FALL 1971			INTERSESSION 1972			SPRING 1972			TOTAL		
	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%	INC's	STU-DENTS	%
Music	2	47	4.3	---	---	---	1	77	1.3	3	124	2.42
Nursing	0	639	---	0	10	---	1	624	0.2	1	1,173	0.09
Philosophy	198	1,920	1.0	8	57	14.0	103	1,561	6.6	309	3,538	8.73
Physical Education	13	471	2.8	---	---	---	9	575	1.6	22	1,046	2.10
Physics	6	610	1.0	---	---	---	8	218	3.7	14	728	1.92
Physical Science	4	60	6.7	---	---	---	3	43	7.0	7	103	6.80
Psychology	46	1,189	3.9	0	36	---	36	1,192	3.0	82	2,417	3.39
Social Welfare	3	42	7.1	---	---	---	8	62	13.0	11	104	10.60
Sociology	101	783	12.0	10	97	10.3	48	820	5.9	159	1,700	9.35
Speech Arts	14	232	6.0	0	1	---	3	245	1.2	17	478	3.56
Theater Arts	11	218	5.0	1	28	3.6	18	282	6.4	30	528	5.68
Theology	63	1,101	5.7	1	16	6.3	42	1,190	3.5	106	2,307	4.59
TOTAL	1,073	19,517	5.5	52	800	6.5	712	18,823	3.8	1,837	39,140	4.69

CHART NO. 2: HISTOGRAM OF DISCIPLINES IN TERMS OF PERCENTAGES OF INCOMPLETE GRADES AWARDED: FALL 1971, INTERSESSION 1972, SPRING 1972



Number of Disciplines = 41
Total of Percentages/Discipline = 333.78
Mean Percentage = 3.70
Standard Deviation (σ) = 2.85